

Sergeants Major of the Army

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## **SERGEANTS MAJOR OF THE ARMY**

In October 1965, a Sergeants Major Personnel Conference recommended the establishment of the office of Sergeant Major, US Army. The recommendation had already been studied from a recommendation the year prior, and was then taken to the Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA) who approved the idea. General Orders Number 29, dated 4 July 1966 officially established the office. The first SMA, SMA William O. Wooldridge, was sworn in on 11 July 1966.

The duties and responsibilities of the SMA are to be the principal advisor to the CSA on all enlisted matters. The SMA is considered an expert in enlisted matters and is a direct line from the soldiers in the field to the highest levels of the Army staff. They also sit on many boards (Army Policy Council, Army Staff Council and General Staff Council) in which they have a great influence on many decisions and policies that effect the entire Army. The SMA also gets called to testify before Congress on recruitment and retention of enlisted and quality of life issues.

There have been some changes in selection process over the years. For the first selection, the CSA, General Howard Johnson, wrote a letter to each major command with his goals for the new position and asking for nominations. For the third selection in 1970, they decided to select the SMA by holding a board to select the best 5 or 6, who would then be interviewed by the CSA. They decided not to select anyone with any disciplinary records including Article 15's or letters of reprimand. In 1973, for the fourth selection, then CSA General Abrams added the prerequisite that the SMA be a married man. Now, of course, female Command Sergeants Major (CSM) are also eligible. Currently, a board of six General Officers and the outgoing SMA selects the new SMA.

There have also been changes in the tour length over time. Originally, the tour would correspond to the tenure of the CSA they served with. In 1970, they changed the length to two years, under the belief it would keep fresh ideas in the office. In 1976, they changed the tour length back to three years. SMA Bainbridge had his tour extended to four years, though, from 1975 – 1979. Since his tour, the norm is to assume duties on 1 July, serve 4 years with the CSA that appointed them, then retire from the office and the service.

Originally there was no special rank for the SMA, and the CSM rank had not even been established yet. The first SMA wore SGM rank and a specially designed collar insignia. During his tenure, though, CSM rank was established, and he was presented the first one. In 1978, SMA William Bainbridge designed and was the first to wear a new insignia of rank for the SMA with three stripes, three rockers and two stars in the center. On 13 Oct 94, SMA Richard Kidd was presented the new SMA rank which he had designed himself, and the one still currently worn. The new rank added an American Eagle, to make it closer to rank worn by counterparts in other services and symbolic of an era of increased joint operations. The stars, stripes and eagle also represent every enlisted rank in the Army.

SMA Wooldridge had the honor and distinction of being selected as the first SMA. SMA Wooldridge enlisted in the Army at the age of eighteen in 1940. He fought at Normandy on D-Day and in the Battle of the Bulge in World War II. He also served two tours in Vietnam. When selected as the first SMA over the other 4,700 sergeants major at the time, he was the only one nominated that was currently serving in Vietnam. This had

to be an extremely challenging feat, establishing this new position. I cannot even imagine how he felt to have to create this job from nothing. It's hard enough taking over a position such as this that has already been established. And all he was given was a small note card from General Johnson with some informal guidance. As a side note, SMA Glen Morrell in 1983 was given guidance from his boss that completely filled three pages with themes, specific duties, and miscellaneous directions. SMA Wooldridge stated shortly after assuming his duties "It has been well and frequently said that the Army is people, and people – not personnel – will be my major concern". In this spirit, he made weekly trips to Army posts and spent Christmas in Vietnam. In his first year he had traveled 160,000 miles, visited 25 CONUS installations and went to Vietnam four times and Europe twice.

I think Wooldridge's greatest accomplishment as SMA was establishing the office. He started the office from nothing. He had to put up with a lot of officers that did not like the idea of this new office and wanted to see it fail. Another accomplishment was a centralized system for promotions to MSG and SGM, which eliminated the requirement for a vacancy at the individual's current unit as a prerequisite for promotion. A third accomplishment was the establishment of the CSM rank, and creating an Annual Command Sergeants Major Conference, which are still held today. Here, significant issues involving enlisted soldiers are decided every year.

Unfortunately, SMA Wooldridge, after leaving office and returning to Vietnam, came under investigation for allegations of improprieties pertaining to an open mess club. This caused opponents of the office, who were not that happy about it anyway, to push for

elimination of the position. In the end, Wooldridge pled guilty to conflict of interest, and admitted receiving \$15,000 in stocks and a check for \$9,500 from a company that sold supplies in Vietnam. He was sentenced to a suspended prison term, five years probation and three years of work for a nonprofit charity. It also led to the revoking of the Distinguished Service Medal he had received at the end of his tour as SMA. He had been the first enlisted soldier to receive the medal since World War II.

SMA McKinney had the honor and distinction of being selected as the first African American SMA. SMA McKinney joined the Army in 1968 at the age of 18. He was a Cavalryman and spent his first assignment in Vietnam. He left the service after his first enlistment was up, but only 38 days later, he decided he was not happy and reenlisted. SMA McKinney was sworn in as the tenth SMA on 30 June 1995. CSA Reimer gave SMA McKinney no specific guidance as to his duties. Three of his top priorities were adequate family housing, improving single soldier living conditions, and childcare.

One example of how SMA McKinney was committed to his job and enlisted soldiers was that, even while his only son was in a coma, he insisted on speaking before congress on enlisted matters. Sadly, his son died shortly after. I have also seen SMA McKinney come out of his way to promote a soldier, and on the way to the ceremony make an on the spot correction of another soldier. I also really liked what he had to say about soldiers and college when he first took over. He said "I want to emphasize the fact that I don't want college to take precedence over taking care of soldiers". I agreed with his feelings, and believed too many soldiers had their priorities wrong. He was a fantastic role model for all soldiers, but even more so for minority soldiers. At the time, minority soldiers had

General Colin Powell and SMA McKinney to look up to. They saw firsthand that they could make it to the pinnacle of the Army, as either enlisted or officer.

In February 1997 a former aid accused SMA McKinney of making sexual advances to her. CSA Reimer had no choice but to temporarily suspend McKinney from duty as SMA. During the investigation, five more female soldiers came forward to accuse him. The case was referred to a court martial based on improper behavior by McKinney during the investigation. The CSA then stripped McKinney of the rank of SMA, and back to CSM. In March 1998, McKinney was acquitted of eighteen sexual misconduct related offenses, but convicted of obstructing justice. He was reduced to the grade of E8 and given a reprimand. Based on the law, McKinney still receives retirement pay as SMA. Personally, I believe SMA McKinney committed at least some of the crimes he was acquitted of. But, they were not proved beyond a reasonable doubt. What I didn't like was that he and his defense team started playing the race card. Also, one of their defenses was that other people such as Generals have committed the same offenses, and were not court-martialed. To me, this was saying he was guilty, but should be allowed to retire like others in the past.

I have a lot of respect for the position of SMA. He has all enlisted soldiers' interests in mind every day and makes major changes that effect our daily lives. He has the ear of the man that can make changes happen quickly, and has unobstructed access to him. This is a great responsibility and burden they carry in order to make our enlisted ranks the best in the world. They also need to remember that nobody is above the law and to always set the example.

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